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ABSTRACT

The old but little appreciated rhetorical genre of exploratory writing is a potentially powerful way to enable students to grasp what is going on in the university, to become more culturally literate. It is a means for seeing what constitutes good and bad practice. If training in exploratory writing is effective, students can more fully join the university community, seeing its activities as dialectical, as constituted by traditions of argument which the university transmits as trustee for the society as a whole. A series of assignments for a course entitled "The Contemporary Novel" were designed to help illuminate unstated commonplaces and interpretive strategies embedded in the questions themselves and to encourage the more reflective kind of literary analysis all teachers of literature wish to encourage in their students. (Fifteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Exploratory Writing As Resource for Cultural Literacy

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Writing And The Ends Of Higher Education

The American university has since its beginning been asked to do many things. Writing has always served both as means toward these purposes and as its own end. But today universities and colleges are feeling a bewildering urgency to raise their level of efficacy in a variety of directions. The changing economy emphasizes new skills, and in response, major programs mushroom or contract virtually overnight. The liberal arts are celebrated or criticized by turns. Everywhere there are cries for"reform," "innovation" and "accountability." The university is charged to certify the cultural literacy of an increasing portion of the population. In this frenzied atmosphere, writing seems to have attained an unprecedented public visibility, if not precisely general popularity. Writing is called to center stage often these days, sometimes as a "basic skill," at other times as essential to major programs or to "general education."

This current effort at improving higher education is complicated by pervasive confusion and conflict. The confusion is over fundamentals. It concerns nothing less than what university-level education ought to be about.

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Because the conflicts are so fundamental it is important to recognize that in one sense this problem is not new. Since their beginning at the start of the century, universities in the United States have pursued three quite distinct goals. One conception of the university has seen it as primarily an instrument of social and individual utility. Another has emphasized research and graduate study, while yet a third prizes the university as a bastion of a certain liberal culture. Each goal has had its champions who have struggled to make their views prevail. But to no avail. All three are with us still, always in the same institutions, often within the same departments and programs, not least writing programs.

The utilitarian conception of the university has wanted colleges to provide students with the expertise that would enable them to serve society while enjoying the status of successful middle class professionals. Supporters of this stance early on became allied with proponents of research as the university's true vocation. In opposition to these advocates of professional training and scholarly research, the proponents of education as liberal culture have continued the college tradition. This is a tradition which antedates the research university and sees higher education as above all a place for the cultivation of character and sensibility. In contrast to the former groups' emphasis on technical and scientific studies, advocates of this third view have stressed literary culture.

This history of conflicting ideals remains effective in the present debates over the nature of cultural literacy and the means for its achievement. Not just at the level of explicit statement, but even more in curriculum and institutional organization, the university bears the imprint of these past struggles. The primacy of specialized major programs ensures the continuing importance of the university's utilitarian and research aims. On the other hand general liberal arts requirements press the claims of the liberal culture tradition on students. This remains the case even when faculty teaching in these courses see them as continuations of graduate school specialization by other means.

The question now confronting reflective educators is how to enable students to become adept in the several traditions that characterize university culture. This might be called a "functional" definition of cultural literacy. E.D. Hirsch has rightly emphasized the considerable importance of cultural literacy, though the term can bear a variety of emphases, from a focus on the cultural canon to a different though not wholly incompatible emphasis upon cultural reflexivity. Such an emphasis, in the present context, requires that faculty must aid students in becoming reflective about these differences. Recently, significant work has brought to awareness the pedagogical complications this confusing heritage presents to students and faculty alike.

Notable among these efforts is David Bartholmae's. His striking phrase, "reinventing the university," describes the task of taking the means as well as the ends of higher education seriously.(136). The challenge, as Bartholomae sees it, is that "students must invent the university language...They need a special vocabulary, an interpretive scheme for working out problems, a special system of presentation. They need to understand commonplaces: culturally or institutionally authorized concepts or statements that carry their own necessary elaborations" (137).

Our intent in this article is to develop these insights further. We want to delve into the neglected domain of how students come to understand the commonplaces of culture and, by extension, how faculty can "invent" the university for students and each other in more perspicuous ways. Our focus will be on the old but little appreciated rhetorical genre of exploratory discouse.

The Problem of Entry and the Promise of Exploration

If the challenge for the faculty is to "invent" the several academic cultures for their students, the students face the difficulty of grasping the nature of the cultures they are being asked to enter. Both challenges have everything to do with moving from the position of "outsiders" for whom the goings-on of the university are a mystery, to the position of persons secure and increasingly competent within that cultural world. James Berlin has

caught this point nicely by noting that "...in teaching writing we are providing students with guidance in seeing and structuring their experience with a tacit set of rules about distinguishing truth from falsity, reality from illusion"(7). The key task is to make this process increasingly explicit and comprehensible to students.

Learning is always, in the first instance, mastering largely tacit practices. But reflective education goes on to name and grasp explicitly the gist of the practices learned. Elaine Maimon describes this process as critical thinking. Taking the case of learning anthropology, she notes: "Critical thinking means making choices, asking the right questions. Students learn how anthropologists think by learning the kinds of preliminary questions they ask and the answers they write down"(117). Anthropology provides a good metaphor. We want to argue that both students and faculty must become more careful and explicit in developing something like the kind of trained capacity to grasp and enter other cultures which anthropologists use in their specialized pursuits. Unfortunately, the typical ways in which students are introduced to university culture are far less conducive to this kind of learning than they could be.

Consider for a moment the way students find most fields represented to them. Students encounter the culture of the intellectual disciplines most concretely at the microlevel of the assignments which give structure--and seriousness--to courses. Viewed through their assignments, most fields

appear to students as demanding either informative, proof-oriented writing, or "original, "creative" expressions of insight (Kinneavy 13, 1987). Knowledge, in this regime, means either being able to prove a thesis or to generate a novel insight. The contexts and tacit rules which determine what counts as a valid proof or an original insight are rarely themselves brought to light in these assignments.

Typically, where there have been complaints that a curriculum is too concentrated on fact and scientific objectivity, the response has been to emphasize more personal expression. Writing, together with the old literary tradition of the liberal arts, has often been proferred as the answer. However, programs such as those initiated by Writing Across The Curriculum generally aim either to develop more expressive capacities or to reinforce independent learning (Fulwiler 1982; Knoblauch and Brannon, 1983). Both the emphasis on reporting and proof, and the more subjective emphasis on personal discovery and expression, ignore the key problem.

The public discourse of a field, even or perhaps especially as that field is represented in its textbooks, is not always enough to enable students to make sense of its cultural norms. These are, of course, tacitly understood by those standing within the field--such as the professor. This "insider" knowledge may, depending upon the field, be transmissible through verbal report or it may have to be learned by imitation and doing. But in either case it is

this process of initiation which must be opened to the student. As Bartholomae puts it, without such an initiation, the student risks being "shut out" from "one of the privileged languages of public life, a language he is aware of but cannot control"(139).

Bartholomae is surely correct here. However, in order to master this "public language" of the educated, it is also necessary to learn the "private language" through which the vocabulary, syntax and semantics of the public, formal language can be examined and grasped. The potential of exploratory discourse is that, as a genre, it is particularly suited for this process of learning.

The two most important recent advocates of exploratory writing have been William Zeiger and James Kinneavy . Both have pointed out that exploration is rarely credited as a serious intellectual activity in the public culture of the university. In "The Exploratory Essay: Enfranchising the Spirit of Inquiry in College Composition," Zeiger is at pains to emphasize the legitimacy and importance of exploring problems and issues for their own sake. He contrasts the classic tradition of essayists such as Montaigne with the usual academic treatment of exploration as either something to be done informally and "off the record,"or as the preliminary step to proving a thesis. (456)

Zeiger argues that it is often legitimate and indeed valuable to resist the drive towards solution and closure (457). Yet Zeiger seems to construe this sort of relatively

informal writing as finally in the service of individual expression . At least he seems loathe to link exploration to rules or techniques which can be taught. Such a stance, however, is at odds with the history of his exemplary character. Montaigne, after all, honed his brilliance as an essayist in the schools of Renaissance rhetoric in which modes of exploratory discourse were taught under the titles of "invention" and "dialectic."

James Kinneavy has developed a presentation of exploratory discourse which acknowledges it as type of argument with its own style, organizational patterns, and logic.(A Theory of Discourse) Kinneavy explicitly discusses these aspects of exploration in the context of the tradition of classical rhetoric and philosophy. Kinneavy has lately emphasized the traditional connection between dialectical or inventive discourse and moral and political topics ("The Liberal Arts and the Current Moral and Political Crisis"). And he has stressed that exploration tends to follow a logical pattern, though one more dialogical than deductive. This enables him to legitimate exploration as an essential aspect of the development of all intellectual traditions. Kinneavy does not connect his discussions of exploration explicitly with the problem of intellectual initiation. However, we will try to show that his conception of exploratory discourse can be developed into a powerful technique for addressing this issue.

Exploration And "Inventing the University"

Exploration can serve as a tool with which to open up the commonplaces and basic assumptions which are presupposed but not always made explicit in the "public language" of a field. In this section we will first try, following Kinneavy, to sketch a view of how this can be so. In the following section we will then exemplify the process by presenting and analyzing some illustrative assignments.

Kinneavy has developed a scheme of exploratory logic which is helpful here. "Many scientific papers really are the third stages of exploration," writes Kinneavy.(184) In his scheme, exploration often, but not always, begins by questioning a "dogma," a generally accepted belief in a field. The second stage in exploration is typically the confrontation of that dogma with various anomalies, cases which do not seem to fit. This terminology is derived from Thomas Kuhn's influential treatment of the history of conceptual change in the sciences, and it suits Kinneavy's purposes well when he enumerates the third stage. This is the stage of "proof" in which the questioning logic of exploration shifts to the controlled process of deduction. The problem for students--as for laymen outside any field--is that scientific presentations habitually suppress all but this last kind of discourse.

Formal presentations of knowledge, including the typical textbook in any field, preclude by their very organization any peek behind the deductive curtain at how the theory was actually arrived at and why. But such are

precisely the concerns of exploration. Sustained practice of exploratory thinking, particularly in the form of writing assignments, can serve to move students inside the commonplaces which structure disciplines.

Exploration, in its classical form of dialectic, is one of several types of discourse distinguished by Aristotle. Kinneavy's use of exploration follows Aristotle and Cicero in distinguishing dialectic from scientific or demonstrative discourse. Demonstration, in this view, is in one sense the ideal form of argument. It aims at certitude. By constrast Aristotle conceived of dialectic as distinguished from demonstration precisely because its aim is not certitude, not yes or no, but what Kinneavy calls probable truth.("Lib. Arts 171) Dialectical thinking always concludes with qualified assertions rather than binary oppositions. Dialectical thinking is relational. It is the truth of something compared to something else. In the modern scientific era the tremendous prestige of the demonstrative ideal has made dialectical discourse appear soft and therefore less legitimate. Everybody may do it in private; scientists themselves do it all the time, but when it is time to write up the research report, no trace of this should remain.

Exploration can take many forms. Kinneavy notes that it takes place more commonly in dialogue than in writing.(100) But in writing, too, there are many possibilities. Assignments which call for examining the

arguments for and against a position; discovering the history of a problem or issue, as in Kinneavy's three-part progression; noting divergence in points of view and trying out different ways of relating them: all these can be occasions for developing exploratory capacities. All are ways of going "behind the scenes" of the intellectual world. For students, these can be ways of discovering where the commonplaces and issues of a field have come from, and why the public discourse of a field is the way it is.

Exploratory Writing and the Teaching of Literature

Assignments framed in the exploratory mode would seem especially appropriate in the study of a discipline such as literature where there may even be less agreement than in other disciplines concerning the problems worthy of study, and the contexts and tacit rules for what counts as a valid proof or an original insight. (Macdonald 319) Literature classes may seem to students to convey conflicting notions about what constitutes acceptable argument, reflecting major distinctions between theorists who believe that the major goal of literary interpretation is "perpetual non-closure", versus those like Edgar Roberts, who in his well known text, Writing Themes About Literature present the goal of literary analysis as the "discovery of truth" (6).

A recent analysis of scholarly essays suggests that essays in literary interpretation have many of the characteristics of exploratory discourse. Macdonald says "as a form of argumentation, literary interpretation is less

concerned with solving a problem than with discovering and articulating complexities that are valued in themselves, and that problems neither can be solved in such a way that literary texts might lose their power to stimulate inquiry....." (323) The goal of these essays is not so much to resolve contraries expressed in the opposed loci in literary arguments, but to show how literature will have it both ways. These essays have many of the characteristics of exploratory discourse. They are often organized dialectially in the language of qualified assertion.

On the other hand, Roberts says that, "The goal is to try and recreate to some degree the way in which the author looked at the work, to see the blank page the author originally saw and try to reconstruct the ideas the author had. Roberts urges proof through demonstration in langauge that is "accurate and forceful" (25) This thesis of a model essay in Roberts' text exemplifies the kind of thesis common to literary analysis that arrives at closure: "He [Lord Jim] is basically a dreamer, a romantic in Stein's words who is capable of imagining the best both in himself and others, but is without the ability to fulfill his ideals." (63)

The expert knows that exploration as well as demonstration are standard ways of responding to literary questions related to various schools of literary criticism. and we know that some students will arrive at this insight, most likely by becoming aware of the exploratory nature that characterizes much discussion in literature classes. But

most writing assignments in literature classes offer no options but the demonstrative, deductive approach.

In contrast, partly because they resemble an important genre of literary criticism, exploratory writing assignments can make the differences between two major interpretive perspectives more explicit. Without this understanding, students cannot take part in, or fully understand the scholarship of the field. Furthermore, returning to our central thesis, because of their emphasis on the understanding of questions rather than on the marshalling of evidence to support a thesis, these assignments may help to illuminate unstated commonplaces and interpretive stategies embedded in the questions themselves and encourage the more reflective kind of literary analysis all teachers of literature wish to encourage.

The Assignments.

To test this idea we designed a series of assignments for "The Contemporary Novel," an intermediate level course that attracts both majors and non-majors. The format of the assignments simulated part of the process that would be followed by a scholar approaching a literary work. The scholar might tackle an interpretive problem by imitating virtually the entire exploratory process: posing of anomalies, advancing reasons for the repudiation of the initial dogma as well as reasons for the response to the objections, searching for a new model, formulating a new hypothesis, and finally proposing a new theory. However,

agreeing with Kinneavy that most undergraduates do not have the knowledge to negotiate a comprehensive exploration(Liberal Arts 183), we constructed our assignments to resemble the first stage of the exploratory process, the stage at which the primary task is to understand the claim as well as the reasoning behind it, and to possibly challenge the claim.

We tried to construct assignments that would encourage an exploratory approach. All of the assignments were based on claims which identified ambiguities in the text and the possibility that there was no resolution for them. Although we offered a few general suggestions for how to organize the papers, we urged students to feel free to permit paradoxes suggested by the claims to remain unresolved.

For example, consider an assignment focused on E. M. Foster's novel, Howards End.

> Forster seems to doubt his own prescriptions for the good life: Only connect, the importance of the inner life, the revitalizing quality of the country, the moral imperative that we must help the underclass. Discuss by explaining and supporting this claim, or by challenging it."

This notion of discussion, "to explain and support this claim", is typical of literary criticism. Discussion in this sense means to expose rather than resolve paradox. We assumed that by exploring the claim, students might become aware of an unstated commonplace embedded in the claim, namely that "we are always being asked to look through or behind simple or deceptive appearances to discern complex realities" (Secor 108); one interpretive strategy or scheme

for reconciling that difference between appearance and reality, what a text appears to mean and what it actually does mean, is to analyze and compare the author's asides to the reader, which in Howards End are often filled with irony and sarcasm, with other elements in the text. In other words to use Bartholomae's terms, we were hoping that students would become more aware of one particular discipline-specific interpretive scheme that enables a reader to say he or she has grasped the meaning of a text.

In his response to the assignment, Paul, a senior majoring in English, both explained and challenged the claim. Verifying that many elements in the novel are at odds with Forster's comments in the asides to the reader, Paul begins his paper by asserting that "A distinctive characteristic of E.M. Forster's Howards End is the prevailing ambivalence with which Forster treats several themes presented in the novel. In most cases this ambivalence is patently obvious." Paul then develops his discussion of the claim in the assignment question dialectically, showing how Forster appears to favor one point of view, than another when it comes to giving the reader advice on how to live in a changing society.

However, Paul then challenges the claim, commenting that if Forster intended to extend this ambivalence to his advice to "Only Connect" he did not succeed. In his conclusion, Paul says, " The central theme of only connect is not subjected to Forster's ambivalence. The final

chapter, especially, is a strong endorsement of the theme and even attempts to gloss over negative events of the story by presenting an ending where Margaret's connection is elevated to heroic proportions."

For Paul the anomaly was not sufficiently serious to invalidate the claim, though a pracitioner of literary criticsim would have made that move. In good exploratory fashion Paul found an anomaly, evidence in the text that makes the claim problematic. He was imitating the silent conversation of the literary scholar that students are rarely privy to or asked to replicate. The scholar typically discovers an element in a text which an accepted interpretation of the work does not explain. Unlike Paul, the experienced practitioner would then develop a new theory to accommodate the anomalous elements. Paul's exploration also can be viewed as that "peek behind the deductive curtain" we referred to earlier.

Paul had ended his paper with what might become the logical hypothesis of a future "thesis-support" paper. Paul's last sentence was "In the end Forster is unambivalent in his presentation of the theme "Only Connect." In a future paper Paul could argue that the major theme in Howards End is "Only Connect." Unlike the exploratory paper, the future demonstrative essay ,which Kinneavy characterizes as the last stage of an exploration (Liberal Arts 183), would marshal evidence to prove this thesis. Such a process draws

the students into the intellectual practice of critics by permitting the student to see its logic from the inside.

A different assignment presents a claim about a common problem of literary interpretation, the understanding of character.

> When a personality exists in the air it exists only as a group of contradictory impressions in the minds of others. Discuss the impressions we have of Mrs. Ramsey from Tansley, Lily and Mrs. Ramsey herself. Are the contradictions between these impressions more significant than the similarities between them? (Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse)

In this assignment the student's exploration of the stated claim is a lead into the unstated question, "How do we know the real Mrs. Ramsey?" The implied commonplace is that characters in literature are immensely complex and that it may be impossible to answer that question other than to say that Mrs. Ramsey is not one, but many characters, and to grasp that complexity one interpretive schemata requires that we take into account the impressions of all of the characters, as well as Mrs. Ramsey's reflections about herself. The students were reminded that they were free to take issue with the claim if they wished.

For Kim, who chose to limit her paper to a simple explanation of the claim, the exploratory mode encouraged her to perform a more comprehensive analysis of character than she might have in response to a different kind of assignment. Kim seems to waiver between affirming the assignment's claim and her view that her analysis will

indeed reveal something like the "truth" about Mrs.Ramsey's character. She begins by extending the claim to other elements of the text besides character: "Virginia Woolf continually makes the reader aware of the fact that nothing can be counted on as being undeniably certain and that individual perception can be extremely important. Throughout the novel Woolf uses this concept of perception to describe the characters." However, Kim appears to contradict herself when she concludes the introduction by saying, "Thus, Virginia Woolf skillfully enables the reader to combine all perceptions both conflicting and contrasting, to form a complete picture of a very complex personality."

Kim seems torn between the two different approaches to interpreting literature discussed earlier, one that attempts to preserve ambiguity, the other which tries to resolve it. However, she uses the body of the paper to explore dialectically the contradictory impressions of Mrs. Ramsey.

Both Paul and Kim use the tentative language associated with exploratory discourse (Liberal Arts 200) , but unlike Paul who uses "but" to signal new directions in the dialectic ("But although Forster attributes some value to the inner life, he also raises doubt that the sisters have sacrificed too much for personal relations and in effect have led rather stagnated lives.") Kim uses many qualifying words to suggest probablity rather than certainty, as in the following section of her paper, which also illustrates its dialectical organization:

> "A large portion of Mrs. Ramsey's personality seems to hinge on her beauty and youthfulness. However, almost immediately after she is introduced, the reader sees her standing in front of the mirror eyeing herself critically for when she looked in the glass and saw her grey hair her cheek sunk at fifty she thought, possibly she could have managed things better ..."

Kim goes on to point out that this impression is contradicted by Mrs. Ramsey's youthful and childlike behavior on the way to town with Tansley who "further confuses our understanding of Mrs. Ramsey by his reflections on her beauty." She goes on to say, "This romantic view is certainly not the same vision Mrs. Ramsey saw in the mirror." Kim ends the paragraph with the question, "Which then is the real Mrs. Ramsey?," suggesting her impatience with the ambiguity.

In the conclusion of her paper Kim ignores the part of assignment question that reads, "Are the contradictions in these impressions more important than the similarities", possibly because Kim's purpose is to resolve the contradictory impressions of Mrs. Ramsey which the assignment by its structure compelled her to explore. She says, "Yet all points of contrast and agreement fit together into the figure of a very complex character, a woman who has a strong desire to help people and to feel needed, a woman who is kind and good in spite of her faults." That Kim chooses to resolve conflicting perceptions of Mrs.Ramsey does not diminish the benefits of exploring the claim itself. The assignment seems to postpone closure for Kim when it comes to deciding who Mrs. Ramsey is.

Kim's conclusion about Mrs. Ramsey could become the thesis for the demonstrative paper which tries to prove that there is indeed a real Mrs. Ramsey. As in Paul's case, we might increase her understanding of the differences between the deductive and the exploratory approach to literary interpretation, by explaining how the paper she would write, that defends her conclusions about who Mrs.Ramsey is, would be a very different paper than the one she had just completed.

Paul's and Kim's papers are representative of the types of responses we received to an assignment that specifically discouraged an attempt at closure. Our point is not that exploration is superior to demonstration. It is rather that the quality of proof by demonstration depends on the power of the dialectic of which the proof is the outcome. The strength of a concluding answer is relative to the penetration of the question to which the answer is addressed.

If faculty want good answers then it will prove a good investment to spend more effort in developing exploratory techniques which sharpen students' abilities to see the point of questions, which really means seeing how the commonplaces of the field are embedded in the questions which assignments pose.

In trying to represent intellectual life to students, we are trying to draw them into a practice and to make them participants in it. In this way our task is more like

teaching someone to play a sport, to dance, or to play a musical instrument than it is like simply transmitting information. Exploratory writing is a potentially powerful way to enable students to grasp what is going on in the university, for becoming more culturally literate. It is a means for seeing what constitutes good and bad practice. If training in exploratory writing does its work, students can more fully join the university themselves, seeing its activities as dialectical, as constituted by traditions of argument which the university transmits as trustee for the society as a whole.

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